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Humanities

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Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: In the Business of Revolution: General Abelardo L. Rodriguez and the Making of Modern Mexico, 1920-1967

Institution: University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Project Director: Jürgen Buchenau

Grant Program: Fellowships

In the Business of Revolution: General Abelardo L. Rodríguez and the Making of Modern Mexico, 1920-1967

Purpose: I am seeking an NEH Fellowship to write a book on General Abelardo L. Rodríguez as a case study of the emergence of a new national bourgeoisie during and after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1940). Rodríguez was president from 1932 to 1934 and one of the individuals who most benefited personally from the revolution. Virtually penniless at the outset, he rapidly rose through the ranks in the army. He became a millionaire by seizing the lucrative business in prostitution and gambling that characterized the Mexican border state of Baja California in the 1920s, and then added to his wealth by investing in the growing entertainment industry. Rodríguez epitomized the corrupt revolutionary elite depicted in Carlos Fuentes's novel, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*; a group that had forgotten its earlier zeal for improving the living conditions of workers and peasants in favor of an all-absorbing obsession with personal gain.

My project demonstrates the connections between wealth and political power in twentieth-century Latin America, connections often taken for granted but never studied in detail. Historians have steered away from such analyses, in part because most archives open to the public contain little information on political leaders as entrepreneurs. While many of these leaders destroyed their business records or kept them under lock and key rather than turn them over to government archives, Rodríguez constitutes a fascinating exception. His recently discovered private archive in Mexico City contains abundant and hitherto unknown documentation on his business and political activities. Along with other collections such as the Rodríguez archive housed at the Universidad de Baja California in Tijuana, the new documentation allows the historian to trace the growth of Rodríguez's entertainment empire, and its connection with his growing political influence. My research reveals the new opportunities available in the postrevolutionary political order for the type of corruption characterized by the party that ruled Mexico from 1929 until 2000, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, or Institutional Revolutionary Party). The present popular distrust in the country's newly democratic institutions, distrust that lingers even in an era in which the PRI no longer dominates Mexico, has its roots in the era that allowed Rodríguez to rise to wealth and power. Similar instances of the abuse of military and political power for personal benefit have plagued other Latin American nations, and, indeed, much of the world in general.

Significance: Periods of prolonged bloodshed afford great opportunities for ambitious military leaders to carve out spheres of personal power. That was the case in revolutionary Mexico, where a mass-based movement swept away an entrenched dictatorship before disintegrating into several factions that continued to fight with each other until 1920. By then, more than one million had died, and the nation's economy lay in ruins. The fighting had left regional warlords in charge of most state governments, and central authority was weak. At the time, border towns like Tijuana and Mexicali were targets of vice tourism, places of refuge for U.S. visitors who came to escape the strict laws of the Prohibition era. These towns brimmed with brothels, casinos, and nightclubs, protected by warlords such as Baja California governor Esteban Cantú in exchange for a large percentage of their profits. In its quest to expand its authority, the new revolutionary government attempted to eradicate both vice tourism and the rule of warlords on the border. It was thus that General Abelardo Rodríguez came to Tijuana in August 1920 to reassert central government authority over Baja California. Fifteen years later, he had become the prototype of a new class of entrepreneurs who played important political roles and dominated the emerging leisure industry that served the growing middle class in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Rodríguez appears in most scholarship as a minor political figure in the "Sonoran Dynasty," a group of revolutionary leaders from the border state of Sonora who dominated Mexico from 1920 to 1935. In fact, however, he was a key political and economic figure into the 1960s. Born in 1889, Rodríguez was drifting through life when the revolution offered him the chance at a fresh start. As police chief of Nogales, he formed business alliances with eventual presidents and fellow Sonorans Plutarco Elías Calles and Alvaro Obregón. When Obregón sent him to Tijuana to submit Baja California to the new central government, Rodríguez closed down the city's night clubs and casinos, only to inaugurate his

own entertainment empire in alliance with U.S. investors, Calles, and Obregón. In so doing, he promoted the very activities he had been sent to prohibit, epitomizing a regime whose protagonists often said one thing and did quite the opposite. Within two decades, Rodríguez had become a multimillionaire. By the 1950s, he was a partner in more than two hundred privately held companies with a net worth of more than \$100 million. His holdings included movie theaters, hotels, golf courses, breweries, vineyards, and snack producers, among other ventures. In the final decade before his death in 1967, Rodríguez's fortunes gradually waned amidst the emergence of William O. Jenkins's movie empire, but he remained important in national political life as an exponent of anti-Communist policies within the ruling PRI.

Apart from one brief Mexican publication (Gómez Estrada, 2002), my project will be the first serious study of Rodríguez. Following my earlier work, it questions the notion of Calles as jefe máximo (Supreme Chief) who manipulated Rodríguez and other allies from his behind-the-scenes role following the assassination of Obregón in 1928. In public, Rodríguez often took Calles's lead throughout the 1920s and 1930s and appeared to defer to him as a mentor. However, Rodríguez far surpassed Calles in personal wealth and business connections. As a result, his presidency witnessed the gradual decline of Calles's power and paved the way for President Lázaro Cárdenas, a populist leader still renowned for parceling out 49 million acres of land to campesinos and expropriating the foreign-owned oil industry. The Rodríguez presidency therefore marked the beginning of a period of transition to a political landscape without Calles, who was exiled in April 1936. Ironically, Rodríguez, the same leader who helped the Cardenista left to power, emerged as a leader of the Mexican right only twelve years later.

This study will make a contribution to Mexican historiography by demonstrating the significance of entrepreneurial competition in the shaping of the modern state. By the mid-1920s, Mexico featured at least three rival entrepreneurial circles: the Sonoran group under Rodríguez and Calles; the Monterrey elite under the leadership of General Juan Andreu Almazán; and a smaller group from Michoacán that included both Ortiz Rubio and Cárdenas. Other entrepreneurs like Aarón Sáenz of Monterrey and Maximino Avila Camacho of Puebla served as intermediaries among those circles. In the end, Cárdenas crushed the Sonoran group by means of his alliance with mass popular organizations. While the Nuevo León group survived Cardenismo with little damage (Saragoza, 1988), Rodríguez was the only one of the Sonoran leaders to add to his wealth, in large part due to his ability to reconcile his own interests with those of Cárdenas and his allies. My study therefore challenges the existing orthodoxy that describes Callista Mexico as a chaotic, Hobbesian world of unbridled personal ambitions in which presidents, governors, and other political leaders followed each other in rapid succession until Cárdenas put an end to Calles's power in late 1935 (Dulles, 1961). Instead, I will follow the lead of political scientist Roderic Ai Camp in arguing that conflict of revolutionary camarillas tied together by kinship and common business interests helped structure not only the political discourse and practice of the governing elite, but also the building of the post-revolutionary state under the leadership of the official party. The focus on primary research will distinguish my work from Camp's political science models and illustrate the human dimension of elite networks. Indeed, this will be the first study that demonstrates the inner workings of a revolutionary camarilla—the Rodríguez-Calles group—based on primary archival research that looks at the members of this group as both entrepreneurs and politicians.

The project also provides a new explanation of how entrepreneur-politicians confronted popular demands for social change. Throughout Latin America, these demands increased during the 1920s and particularly following the Great Depression, which affected the region almost as much as it did the United States and Europe. Mexico was unique in that the revolutionary Constitution of 1917 provided a series of theoretical guarantees to workers and campesinos—guarantees that the government and (after 1929) the official party promised to fulfill. Yet Rodríguez's career demonstrates that the governing elite of Mexico, like that of many of the other large Latin American nations such as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, managed not only to co-opt, but also to benefit from the social upheaval of the 1930s. As president, Rodríguez supported social reform, and particularly the renewal of land distributions and a minimum wage. As an entrepreneur, he recognized the implications of labor and agrarian radicalism. Aware that Cardenismo targeted large estates and mining activities as well as the casinos on the border, Rodríguez shifted his investments into the entertainment industry, a new and emerging sector that benefited from the state's

emphasis on consumer-driven economic growth. In particular, he invested in hotels, spas, drink producers, and movie theaters. I hope that my study may invite others to complement the literature on social movements in the 1920s and 1930s with analyses of the business activities of wealthy leaders who professed to champion the causes of the poor yet ended up profiting from the social programs they created.

Methodology and Plan of Work: The project is based on Mexican and U.S. primary sources, and particularly Rodríguez's private archive, which recently became available for consultation at the Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPEC) in Mexico City. I am the first historian to have consulted this archive. Stashed away for decades in the attic of a private residence, it consists of more than 70,000 documents. Containing correspondence as well as balance sheets and other documents on Rodríguez's various business ventures, this archive allows a surprisingly honest look at how an upstart came to power and wealth in revolutionary Mexico. Among other items, I found an appraisal of the jewelry in the estate of Rodríguez's widow in the amount of more than eight million dollars, a detailed listing of family assets as of 1967, and several testaments and balance sheets. I will finish up the research in this collection in the summer of 2007 and plan several shorter trips until the beginning of the fellowship period in July 2008 to Tijuana and College Park, Md., to do research in local and state archives in Baja California as well as in the U.S. National Archives.

The fellowship would allow me to write the book manuscript during the 2008-2009 academic year. My position as Director of Latin American Studies at UNC Charlotte entails heavy administrative responsibilities, as we are currently adding an M.A. program at our high-growth institution. More than half of my time is currently devoted to administration, including the summer, and I also teach in the Latin American Studies program. Therefore, I have little time for research and writing during the academic year, and I require a fellowship such as this one to get the book manuscript done.

I envision a book of five chapters. Chapter One, "The Opportunistic Revolutionary," traces Rodríguez's emergence as a member of the Sonoran coalition under General Alvaro Obregón. Chapter Two, "Transforming Baja California" studies Rodríguez's rise to wealth and power as governor and chief of military operations in the border state during the 1920s. Tentatively entitled "In the Vortex of the Maximato," Chapter Three examines Rodríguez's role in national politics (1931-1935), and especially the transition from the Maximato to the rule of Cárdenas. With particular emphasis on the movie industry and Garci-Crespo, Chapter Four, "A National Entrepreneur," addresses the expansion of Rodríguez's business ventures beyond Baja California from 1935 to 1950. The final chapter, "The Changing of the Guard," analyzes the decline of Rodríguez's fortunes in the 1950s and 1960s due to the emergence of Jenkins's transnational entertainment empire. It also examines his late political role as the focal point of the Mexican right, and particularly the anti-Communist movement.

During the fellowship year, I plan to devote six weeks to writing each chapter as well as another two weeks for the introduction and conclusion. The goal is to finish a draft manuscript by late February, 2009, followed by approximately four months of revisions. I plan to spend a part of those four months in Mexico to do any necessary follow up work in the archives, followed by submission of the completed manuscript to a publisher in August 2009.

I am well positioned to finish this project. I have read extensively on twentieth-century Mexican history in the course of previous research, which resulted in three monographs (including a prize-winning book on Calles), an edited volume, and eighteen articles and book chapters. Fluent in Spanish, I possess the language skills necessary for the project. I am also at an advanced stage in my research. This summer, I will complete the archival research in FAPEC as well as two other archives in Mexico City: the Archivo General de la Nación, and the archive of the foreign relations secretariat, the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. I will get all research in Tijuana and Washington D.C. accomplished during the academic year 2007-8 and the early summer of 2008.

The prospects for publication of this book are excellent. I have already contacted several publishers about my project, and the _____, the _____, and _____ have all expressed interest in the manuscript.

Exemption 4

Exemption 4

Select Bibliography

Archives

Mexico

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Ramo Presidentes

Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca, Mexico City.

Archivo Abelardo L. Rodríguez

Archivo Plutarco Elías Calles.

Universidad de Baja California, Tijuana.

Archivo Particular de Abelardo Rodríguez

Archivo Histórico del Gobierno de Baja California, Tijuana.

United States

National Archives, College Park, Md.

RG 59: General Records of the Department of State.

RG 165: Records of the Army General and Special Staffs. Military Intelligence Division.

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